

‘SANGEET SHAKUNTAL’ (1880-1980)

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On October 31, 1980, we celebrate the centenary of the Marathi ‘sangeet natak’. On the evening of October 31, 1880, Annasaheb Kirloskar’s play, ‘Sangeet Shakuntal’, was staged at the Anandodbhav theatre in Pune. Only four acts were staged but it came to be recognised as a pioneering effort.

Kirloskar, born in Gurlhosur, spent his early years in Belgaum. He used to dabble in playwriting and in composing verse both in Marathi and Kannada. Growing up in a region which shares Marathi and Kannada culture in equal measure, he naturally submitted himself to the influence of Kannada theatre.

‘Sangeet Shakuntal’ is a rendering of Kalidasa’s Sanskrit classic, ‘Abhijnana Shakuntalam’. Kirloskar grew up in a family steeped in the love of Sanskrit and of music. A few years before he undertook this translation, Kalidasa’s play had been published in a Kannada version. Unfortunately, this was not promptly staged. Kirloskar obviously knew the translator, Churmuri, intimately, and it is likely that this Kannada precedent gave him the idea of undertaking a Marathi translation of the same play.

As with all dates in the history of the Marathi theatre, there is the usual difference of opinion about the day on which Annasaheb himself staged his ‘Shakuntal’. K.B. Marathe, a researcher from Belgaum, has provided enough evidence to suggest that the first four acts of the Marathi version had been performed by an organisation in Belgaum some years before the 1880 first night in Pune.

Marathe’s findings are not easy to contest. But the centenary celebration of Marathi ‘sangeet natak’ need not be affected because we awoke to the truth a few years late! In fact, ‘Shakuntal’ is not even the first Marathi musical play as we know the form today. Sokar Bapuji Trilokekar had preceded Kirloskar in this matter. The point is that the average playgoer who goes to the theatre today, and who has been doing so for the last hundred years, has not heard of Trilokekar. ‘Shakuntal’ is not a fossilised

phenomenon hidden between the covers of some fading printed book but is a living reality. Its influence on a whole century of Marathi musical drama has been deep and abiding.

Annasaheb Kirloskar's contribution is unique because it was he who first gave Marathi musical drama a convincing form. At the turn of the century, we had the proliferation of what is called the "bookish" play. Maharashtrian pundits honestly believed that the secret of British superiority under the Raj lay in the language of the rulers, in the literature and knowledge for which the English language served as a vehicle. Brahmins from Pune began translating Shakespeare, for instance, with a vengeance. Before 1900 we had all the Bard's plays translated into Marathi, some of them in more than one version. Very few of them ultimately reached the stage although those that did remained viable for many decades.

What Kirloskar was seeking to do, along with a few other contemporaries, suggests a reverse process. Bringing the Sanskrit classics down to the actual theatre was an educative task. Sanskrit theatre had been dead for all practical purposes. Kirloskar translated Kalidasa's internationally known classic, while his immediate disciple Govind Ballal Deval followed with translations of a few other Sanskrit classics. Their approach was far from being "bookish"; in fact, modern researchers continue to pick holes in their renderings. But how would this matter when their aim was solely to provide a stage-worthy version that could appeal to all strata of playgoers?

Kirloskar's pioneering lies in the musical solution he found for the *slokas* of the original play. He was after all only retelling the story of Shakuntala and King Dushyanta but, in order to communicate to playgoers to the maximum extent, we find him using a contemporary idiom both in prose dialogue and song. It is difficult to believe that 'Sangeet Shakuntal' was written more than a hundred years ago when we hear the songs penned by Kirloskar. They are uniquely evocative, very simply written and suited to an appropriately classical tuning.

When 'Sangeet Shakuntal' was first staged, the actor who played Shakuntala did not have to sing—because he was no singer! A few years after the first performance, Bhaurao Kolhatkar started appearing in the role. He was one of the first of the great Marathi singer-actors. Deval, then very close to Kirloskar and the Kirloskar Natak Mandali, was specially commissioned to write the songs for Shakuntala. He has written them in a manner which can be easily mistaken for Annasaheb's own style!

Kirloskar has left behind two equally great musical plays. 'Sangeet Shakuntal' was followed by 'Sangeet Saubhadra.' This is not a translation but a free retelling of the story of Subhadra and Arjuna. Subhadra, sister of Krishna and Balarama, is a childhood sweetheart of the third Pandava,

and the play shows the mischievous Krishna helping her to elope with him. This is not at all an exact replica of all the stories about Arjuna and Subhadra available in our *puranas* and later verse compositions based on them. Kirloskar has furnished an astute mixture of the "light fantastic", proving that indigenous musical drama has maximum impact when such an approach is adopted.

For both 'Shakuntal' and 'Saubhadra', Annasaheb explored the entire gamut of Indian music. He borrowed tunes from Karnatak *ragas* (which were familiar to him owing to his upbringing in Karnataka), from Hindustani classical music (which had a string base already in Maharashtra) and from folk music typified by the *laavni* and other *tamasha* genres. The assimilation is so skilled that today it is difficult to pinpoint the several sources of his borrowing.

When 'Sangeet Shakuntal' and 'Sangeet Saubhadra' were staged in Kirloskar's own times, the manner in which singer-actors dealt with the music was quite different from the manner that prevails in our own times. Hamlet's words "suit the world to the action," may as well be applied to Kirloskar's and Deval's strictly functional approach to the musical part of their plays. Bhaskarbuva Bakhle, the well-known classical vocalist, used to play a female role in Kirloskar's last, incomplete, play, 'Ramarajya-viyoga'. It was he who trained Balgandharva who, as a teen-ager, joined the Kirloskar Natak Mandali after the death of Bhaurao Kolhatkar and of Kirloskar himself.

Broadly speaking, it may be said that, where the Kirloskar-Deval-Bhaurao tradition of functional singing ended, the Bakhale-Balgandharva tradition of elaborate, *khayal*-oriented, singing began. Today, it is impossible to visualise the exact manner in which a Kirloskar or Deval play was performed in their own times. In a play such as 'Sharada' by Deval we have enough indication of the manner in which the prose is inseparable from the verse. There is no real scope here for singer-actors to turn their stage appearance into a *maifil*.

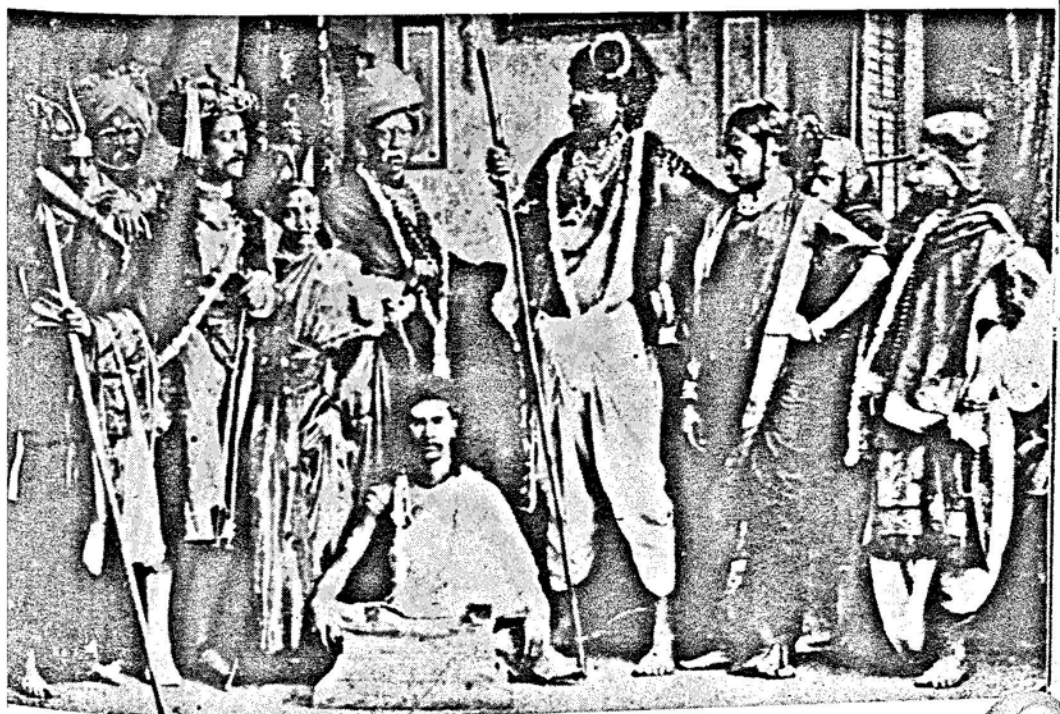
However, the "light fantastic" element which is typified by 'Saubhadra' and also by Deval's 'Sanshaykallol' and 'Mricchakatika' appears to provoke contemporary singer-artists into perpetrating precisely such a travesty of musical drama as Kirloskar had conceived it. The changing format of the performance has, in turn, influenced the very writing of modern-day Marathi musical drama. A number of these plays are woven round the lives of musicians, either historical figures like Tansen or fictitious characters patterned after our *khansahibs*. The plot hangs by a slender thread; but we can legitimately look upon the show as a *maifil* and settle down to enjoying it.

It is not for this writer to discuss whether the century-long fortunes of Marathi 'sangeet natak' indicate decadence at some stage or not. What is to be welcomed is the return to reviving the original form as seen in the latest attempt to translate the Kalidasa classic. This year's centenary celebrations have made it possible for Marathi theatre-goers to see both the Kirloskar version and a new translation made by D.G. Godse and directed by Vijaya Mehta. With lyrics penned by Shankar Vaidya, music by Bhaskar Chandavarkar and choreography by Rohini Bhate, this version is being staged according to the tenets of Bharata's *Natyasastra* as it governed the performances of Sanskrit plays in Kalidasa's times. Here, like Kirloskar, we go back to essentials, to a proper balancing between the literary and the musical aspects.

As for Kirloskar he belongs to Karnataka as much as to Maharashtra. It is hoped that the organisers of the centenary celebrations in Maharashtra will bear this reality in mind and use this opportunity to promote a fruitful exchange of the musical theatres of the two neighbouring regions.



Two scenes from 'Sangeet Shakuntal', Kirloskar Sangeet Mandali 1980, featuring Moroba Wagholikar, Annasaheb Kirloskar and Shankarrao Mazumdar.



शेवटचा आठवडा.

बाहेरगांवच्या लोकांनी आगाऊ पत्राद्वारे कळविण्यास तिकिटें ठेवण्याची
इयबस्था केली जाईल.

किर्लोस्कर संगीत मंडळी

मिरज—सरकारी थिएटरांत.

बुधवार ता० २४/११/२२ **सौभद्र १-५.**
रोर्जी रात्रो.

शनिवार ता० २७/११ **मूकनायक १-३.**
१२ रोर्जी रात्रो.

दरवाजे ९ वाजता उघडून १० वाजता प्रारंभ होईल.

रिक्षवं व सुर्षांची तिकिटें नंबरवारीने मिळतील व ज्या नंबरचे तिकीट असेल त्या
जागेवर बसले पाहिजे. रिक्षवं करून ठेवलेल्या जागेवर आपल्या नांवाचे लेबल पाहून
बसवें.

ज्या कुलीन स्त्रियांची पुरुषांच्या जागेत बसण्याची इच्छा असेल त्यांनी त्या जागेचे
तिकीट काढल्यास त्यांना तेथे बसता येईल.

नाटकगृहांत पान खाऊन सुकणारांस व विडी ओढणारांस नाटकगृहांत घ्यावें
जाणार नाही. तिकिटें प्रयोगाचे दिवशी थिएटरांत मिळतील.

फर्मानचे (तिकिटेंचे) दर

रिक्षवं ९ रांगा	....	....	२	पिट	....	....	....	८८
सुर्षा	....	....	१॥	स्त्रियांकरिता.				
बाक	....	....	१	बाजूची माडी	....	....	....	८८
ओठा किंवा म्यालरी	....	८१२		वेदयांत	....	८१२	सुर्षा	.... १॥

दहा वर्षांच्या आतील मुलांस सवडीप्रमाणे निम्मे दराने तिकिटें मिळतील.

क्रोड रूपः—नाटकगृहांत प्रेक्षकांच्या सायकल, छात्री, कात्या, ओल्डरकोट,
वगैरे सामान; संभाळण्याकरिता स्वतंत्र दालन ठेवण्यांत आले आहे. त्यांत सामान
ठेवणे शास्त्रास, प्रत्येक जिनसास ८१ चेण्यांत येईल.

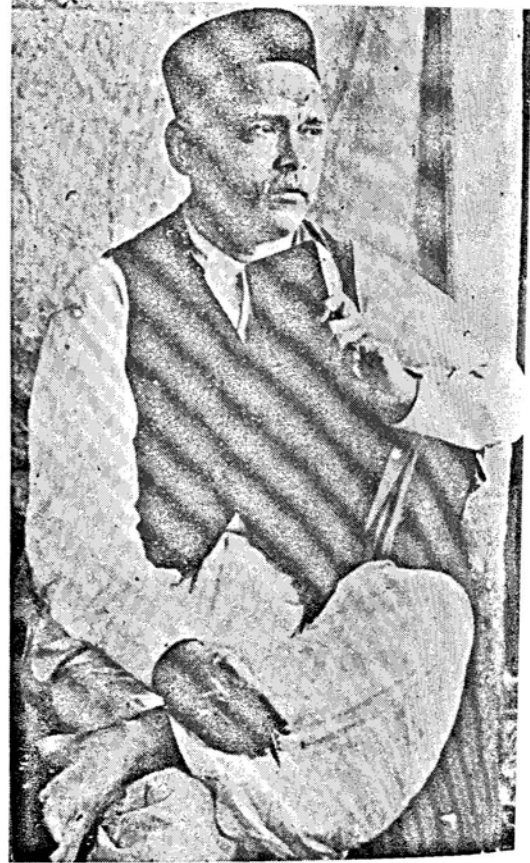
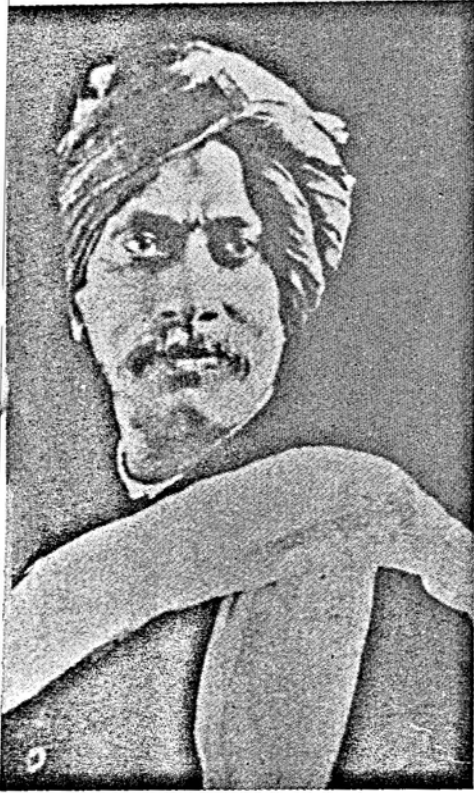
नाटकाच्या वेळी १ आणा घेऊन नाटकाची पुस्तके वाचावयास मिळतील, मात्र
पुस्तकाची किंमत डिपॉझिट ठेविची पाहिजे.

नवीन सोयः—कोणत्याही वर्गातील नाकाच्या सीट रिक्षवं करणे शास्त्रास,
प्रत्येक सीटला २ आणे घेऊन दरवाजे उघडण्यापूर्वी दोन तास अगोदर कळविण्यास
रिक्षवं करण्यांत येईल.

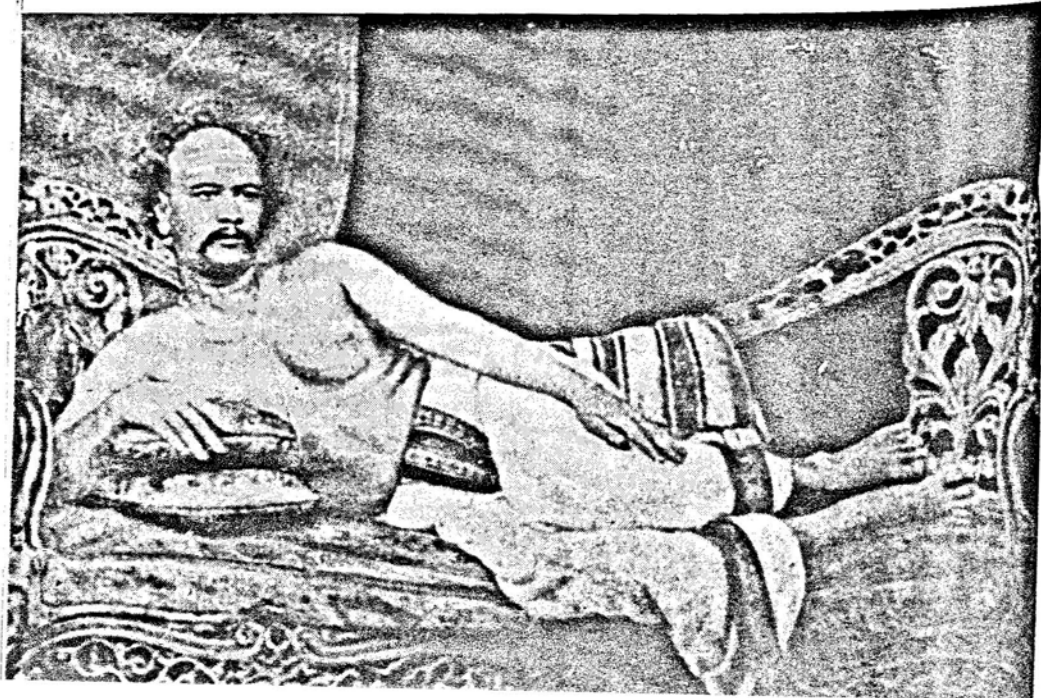
* विनायकच * कापकामा, केशवरा.



'Sangeet Saubhadra' Kirloskar Sangeet Mandali. Balkoba Natekar as Arjun, Bhanrao Kolhatkar as Subhadra and Annasheb Kirloskar as Balram.

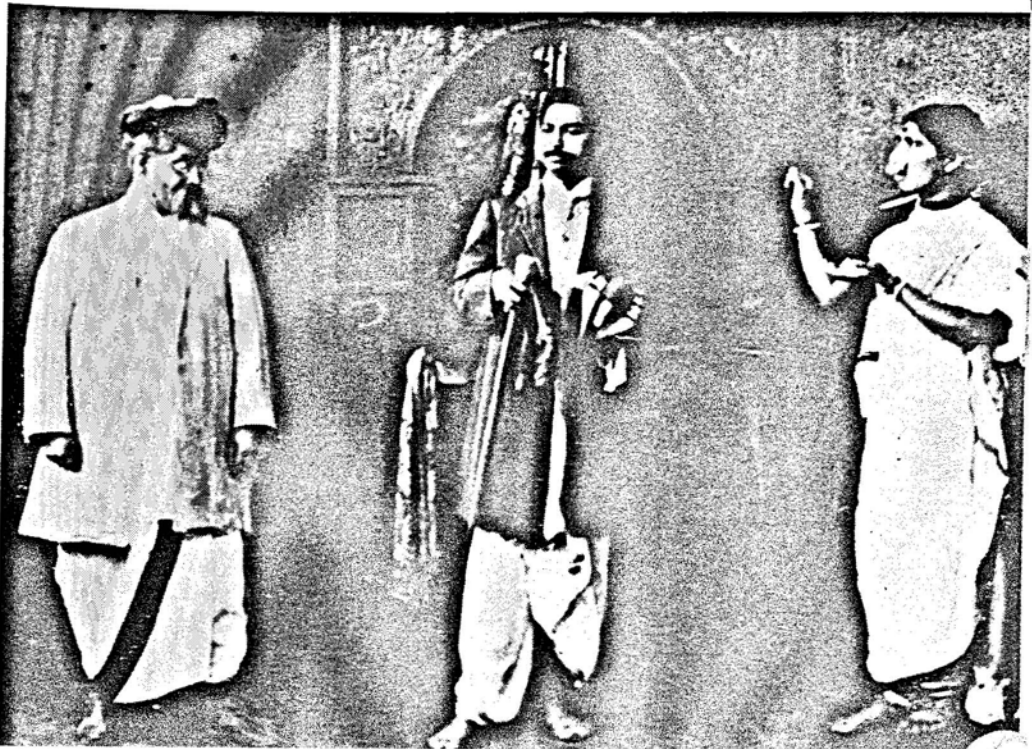


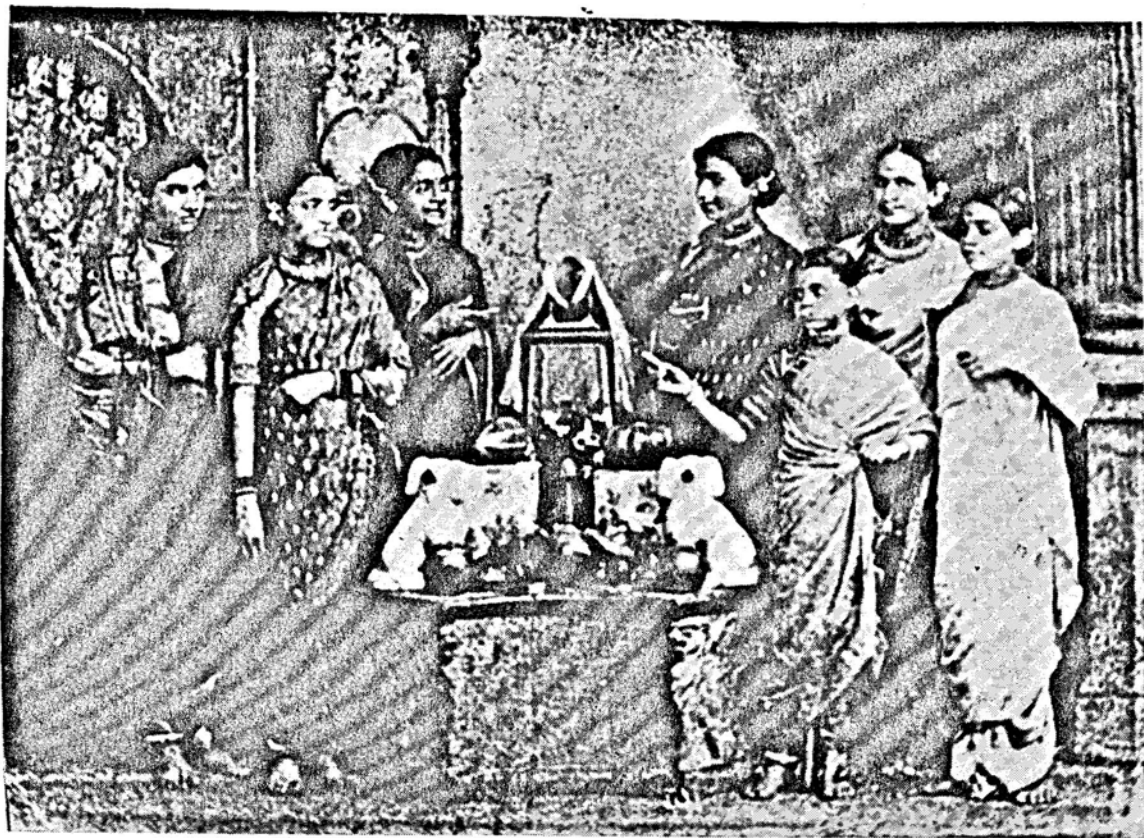
Portraits: left, Bhaskar Bua Bhakale; right, Govind Ballal Deval; below, Annasabeb Kirloskar.





Right: 'Sanshyakollol' by Deval, featuring Bal-gandharva. Below: another scene from 'Sanshyakollol' presented by Gandharva Natak Mandali.





'Sangeet Sharda' by Deval, presented by Swadesh Hitchintak Natak Mandali.